

Reinhabitation

Gary Snyder

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I came here by a path, a line, of people that somehow worked their way from the Atlantic seaboard westward over 150 years. One grandfather ended up in the Territory of Washington, and homesteaded in Kitsap County. My mother's side was railroad people down in Texas, and before that they'd worked the silver mines in Leadville, Colorado. My grandfather, being a homesteader, and my father a native of the state of Washington, put our family relatively early in the Northwest. Yet we weren't early enough. An elderly Salish Indian gentleman came by our farm once every few months in a model T truck, selling smoked salmon. "Who is he?" "He's an Indian," my parents said —

Looking at all the different trees and plants that made up my second-growth Douglas fir forest plus cow-pasture childhood universe, I realized that my parents were short on a certain kind of knowledge. They could say "That's a Doug fir, that's a cedar, that bracken fern ..." But I perceived a subtlety and complexity in those woods that went far beyond a few names.

As a child I spoke with the old Salishan man a few times over the years he made these stops — then, suddenly, he never came back. I sensed what he represented, what he knew, and what it meant to me: he knew better than anyone else I had ever met, *where I was*. I had no notion of a white American or European heritage providing an identity; I defined myself by relation to the place. Soon I also understood that "English language" is an identity—and later, via the hearsay of books, received the full cultural and historical view — but never forgot, or left, that first ground: the "where" of our "who are we?"

There are many people on the planet, now, who are not "inhabitants." Far from their home villages; removed from ancestral territories; moved into town from the farm; went to pan gold in California; work on the Pipeline; work for Bechtel in Iran. Actual inhabitants — peasants, paisanos, paysan, peoples of the land, have been sniffed at, laughed at, and overtaxed for centuries by the urban-based ruling elites. The intellectuals haven't the least notion of what kind of sophisticated, attentive, creative intelligence it takes to "grow food." Virtually all the plants in the gardens and the trees in the orchards, the sheep, cows and goats in the pastures were domesticated in the Neolithic; before "civilization." The differing regions of the world have long had — each — their own precise subsistence pattern developed over millennia by people who had settled in there and learned what particular kinds of plants the ground would "say" at that spot.

Humankind also clearly wanders. Four million years ago those smaller proto-humans were moving in and out of the edges of forest and grassland in Africa; fairly warm; open enough to run in. At some point moving on, catching fire, sewing clothes, swinging around the arctic, setting out on amazing sea voyages. A skull found in Santa Barbara has been dated at 50,000 years. So it may be that during the middle and late Pleistocene, large fauna hunting era, a fairly nomadic grassland-and-tundra hunting life was established, with lots of mobility across northern Eurasia in particular. With the decline of the ice age — and here's where we are — most of the big game hunters went

out of business. There was possibly a population drop in Eurasia and the Americas, as the old techniques no longer worked.

Countless local ecosystem habitation styles emerged. People developed specific ways to *be* in each of those niches: plant knowledge, boats, dogs, traps, nets, fishing—the smaller animals, and smaller tools. From steep jungle slopes of Southwest China to coral atolls to barren arctic deserts — *a spirit of what it was to be there* evolved, that spoke of a direct sense of relation to the “land” — which really means, the totality of the local bio-region system, from cirrus clouds to leaf-mold.

So, inhabitory peoples sometimes say “this piece of land is sacred” — or “all the land is sacred.” This is an attitude, that draws on awareness of the mystery ‘ of life and death; of taking life to live; of giving life back — not only to your own children, but to the life of the whole land.

Abbe Breuil, the French prehistorian who worked extensively in the caves of southern France, has pointed out that the animal murals in those 20,000 year old caves describe fertility as well as hunting — the birth of little bison and cow calves. They show a tender and accurate observation of the qualities and personalities of different creatures; implying a sense of the mutuality of life and death in the food chain; and what I take to be a sense of a sacramental quality in that relationship.

Inhabitation does not mean “not travelling.” The term does not of itself define the size of a territory. The size is determined by the bio-region type. The bison hunters of the great plains are as surely in a “territory” as the Indians of northern California, though the latter may have seldom ventured farther than 30 miles from where they were born. Whether a vast grassland, or a brushy mountain, the Peoples knew their geography. Any member of a hunting society could project from his visualization any spot in the surrounding landscape and tell you what was there; how to get there. “That’s where you’d get some cattails.” The bushmen of the Kalahari desert could locate a buried ostrich egg full of emergency water in the midst of a sandy waste— walk right up and dig it out, “I put this here three years ago, just in case.”

Ray Dasmann has useful terms to make these distinctions: “ecosystem-based cultures” and “biosphere cultures.” Ray means societies whose life and economies are centered in terms of natural regions and watersheds, as against those who discovered — seven or eight thousand years ago in a few corners of the globe — that it was “profitable” to spill over into another drainage, another watershed, another people’s territory, and steal its resources, natural or human. Thus the Roman Empire would strip whole provinces for the benefit of the capital, and villa-owning Roman aristocrats would have huge slave-operated farms in the south using giant wheeled plows. Southern Italy never recovered. We know the term “imperialism” — Dasmann’s “biosphere cultures” adds to that, helps us realize that biological exploitation is a critical part of it too—the species made extinct. The clearcut forests.

All that wealth and power pouring into a few centers had bizarre results. Philosophies and religions based on fascination with society, hierarchy, manipulation, and the

“absolute.” A great edifice called “the state” and the symbols of central power — in China what they used to call “the true dragon”; in the West, as Mumford says, symbolized perhaps by that bronze age fort called the Pentagon. No wonder Levi-Strauss says that civilization has been in a long decline since the Neolithic. “ ’

So here in the 20th century we find occidentals and orientals studying each other’s Wisdom, and a few people on both sides studying what came before both — before they forked off. A book like *Black Elk Speaks*, which would probably have had zero readership in 1900, is perceived now as speaking of certain things that nothing in the Judaeo-Christian tradition, and almost nothing in the Hindu-Buddhist tradition, deals with. All the great civilized world religions remain primarily human centered. That next step excluded, or forgotten — “well, what do you say to Magpie? What do you say to Rattlesnake when you meet him?” What do we learn from Wren, and Hummingbird, and Pine Pollen, and how. Specifics: how to spend a life facing the current; or what it is to perpetually die young; or how to be huge and calm and eat *anything* (Bear). But also, that we are many selves looking at each other, through the same eye.

The reason many of us want to make this step is simple, and is explained in terms of the 40,000 year looping back that we seem to be involved in. Sometime in the last ten years the best brains of the Occident discovered to their amazement that we live in an Environment. This discovery has been forced on us by the realization that we are approaching the limits of something. Stewart Brand said that the photograph of the earth (taken from outer space by a satellite) that shows the whole blue orb with spirals and whorls of cloud, was a great landmark for human consciousness. We see that it has a shape, and it has limits. We are back again, now, in the position of our Mesolithic forebears — working off the coasts of southern Britain, or the shores of Lake Chad or the swamps of southeast China, learning how to live by the sun and the green at that spot. We once more know that we live in a system that is enclosed in a certain way; that has its own kinds of limits, and that we are interdependent with it.

The ethics or morality of this is far more subtle than merely being nice to squirrels. The biological-ecological sciences have been laying out (implicitly) ‘ a spiritual dimension. We must find our way to seeing the mineral cycles, the < water cycles, air cycles, nutrient cycles, as sacramental — and we must incorporate that insight into our own personal ‘ spiritual quest and integrate it with all the wisdom teachings we have received / from the nearer past. The expression of it is simple: gratitude to it all, taking responsibility for your own acts; keeping contact with the sources of the energy that flow into your own life (i.e. dirt, water, flesh).

A question is raised: Is not the purpose of all this living and studying the achievement of self-knowledge, selfrealization? How does knowledge of place help us know the Self? The answer, simply put, is that we are all composite beings, not only physically but intellectually, whose sole individual — identifying feature is a particular form , or structure changing constantly in time. There is no “self’ to be found in that, and yet

oddly enough, there is. Part of you is out there waiting to come into you, and another part of you is behind you, and the “just this” of the ever-present moment holds all the transitory little selves in its mirror. The Avatam-saka (“Flower Wreath”) jeweled-net-interpenetration-ecological-systems-emptiness-consciousness tells us, no self-realization without the Whole Self, and the whole self is the whole thing.

Thus, knowing who and where are intimately linked. There are no limits to the possibilities of the study of *who and where*, if you want to go “beyond limits” — and so, even in a world of biological limits, there is plenty of open mind-space to go out into.

SUMMING UP: In Wendell Berry’s essay “The Unsettling of America” he points out that the way the economic system works now, you’re penalized if you try to stay in one spot and do anything well. It’s not just that the integrity of Native American land is threatened, or National Forests and Parks; it’s *all* land that’s under the gun, and any person or group of people who tries to stay there and do some one thing well, long enough to be able to say, “I love and know this place,” stands to be penalized. The economics of it works so that anyone who jumps at the chance for quick profit is rewarded — doing proper agriculture means *not* to jump at the most profitable chance — proper forest management or game management means doing things with the far future in mind — and the future is unable to pay us for it right now. Doing things right means living as though your grandchildren would also be alive, in this land, carrying on the work we’re doing now, with deepening delight.

I saw old farmers in Kentucky last spring who belong in another century. They are inhabitants; they see the world they know crumbling before them in the face of a different logic that declares, “everything you know, and do, and the way you do it, means nothing to us.” How much more the pain, and loss of elegant cultural skills, on the part of non-white fourth-world primitive remnant cultures who may know the special properties of a certain plant, or how to communicate with Dolphins, skills the industrial world might never regain. Not that special, intriguing knowledges are the real point: it’s the sense of the magic system; the capacity to hear the song of Gaia *at that spot*, that’s lost.

Re-inhabitory refers to the tiny number of persons who come out of the industrial societies (having collected or squandered the fruits of 8000 years of civilization) and then start to turn back to the land, to place. This comes for some with the rational and scientific realization of inter-connectedness, and planetary limits. But the actual demands of a life committed to a place, and living somewhat by the sunshine green plant energy that is concentrating in that spot, are so physically and intellectually intense, that it is a moral and spiritual choice as well.

“Mankind has a rendezvous with destiny in Outer Space.” Some say. We are already travelling in space. This is the galaxy, right here. The wisdom and skill of those who studied the universe first hand, by direct knowledge and experience, for millennia, both inside and outside themselves, is what we might call the Old Ways. Those who

envision a possible future planet on which we continue that study, and where we live by the Green and the Sun, have no choice but to bring whatever science, imagination, strength, and political finesse they have to the support of the inhabitory people — natives and peasants of the world. Entering such paths, we begin to leant a little of the Old Ways, which are outside of history, and forever new.

Bioregional poet Gary Snyder delivered this essay at the “Reinhabitation Conference” at North San Juan School in 1976. It was then published in his splendid book, The Old Ways.

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